

Army Echoes, Issue 2, September 2003

Schoomaker is new Army Chief of Staff

WASHINGTON (ARNEWS) - GEN Peter Schoomaker came out of retirement August 1, and swore to uphold the duties as the Army's 35th Chief of Staff.

"I'm absolutely delighted that General Schoomaker is going to undertake this responsibility," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said. "It's an enormously important one — not just for the Army but for the country."

Before retiring in August 2000, Schoomaker served 31 years in the Army. He said that he knows this Army is very different from the one he entered.

"I truly feel blessed to be part of the Army's future," he said. "I have the opportunity to contend and help the Army as it becomes more relevant and ready."

Schoomaker is the first retired four-star officer ever to be called back to serve as the Army Chief of Staff. He and his father are also one of the few father-and-son teams to serve in the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army. His father, Fred Schoomaker, who also had a long-standing military career, was the assistant to Army Chief of Staff GEN Harold Keith Johnson from 1964-1968. Schoomaker comes from a household of career military men. His younger brother, BG Eric Schoomaker, is the chief of the Army's Southeast Regional Medical Command.

Before retiring, Schoomaker spent three years as commander-in-chief of the U.S. Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base, FL. Since retiring, he has taught and mentored within the Army including serving on the adjunct faculty at the School for the Advanced Military Studies at Ft Leavenworth, KS, and as a senior mentor with the Joint Forces Command

You can request records online

The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) is working to make it easier for veterans with Internet access to obtain copies of documents from their military files.

Military veterans and the next of kin of deceased former military members can use a new online military personnel records system to request documents. Others who need documents must still complete the Standard Form 180 which can be downloaded from the web site.

The new web-based application was designed to provide better service on these requests by eliminating the records center's mail-room processing time. Also, because the requester will be asked to supply all information essential for NPRC to process the request, delays that normally occur when NPRC has to ask veterans for additional information will be minimized.

Veterans and next of kin may access this application at vetrecs.archives.gov. Please note there is no "www" in the address.

Highlights from Headquarters

Greetings Retirees/soldiers and family members—

This has certainly been an eventful summer for the U.S. Army and this office. As the lead story announces, all of us join in welcoming our new Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA), GEN Peter Schoomaker. All soldiers, retirees, veterans, and family members extend our best wishes and prayers to him as he begins his tenure of service as the 35th CSA. We also thank GEN Eric Shinseki for his long and dedicated service to our Army and Nation. May God bless both of them and their families.

During early August (pg. 4), we conducted a very successful Retirement Services Officer (RSO) training conference here. I believe it was important to bring together the installation people who actually prepare soldiers for retirement; and then provide services to them and their families after retirement. They are such a vital part of the Army personnel team! It was a week packed with good training and great team building because all attendees had the opportunity to exchange ideas and learn from each other, and the speakers who provided training or inspiration. Feedback was positive. Our intent is to continue to conduct this weeklong training every other year as we routinely do.

Since our last issue, I have traveled to Retiree Appreciation Days at Schofield Barracks and Ft Buchanan. Once again I met many fine retirees and spouses, and learned from each of you. Soon I will be off to Germany and Italy; and in the late fall to several similar events. Being a part of the installation's recognition of your service to the Army and this Nation is clearly one of the highlights of this job. Frankly, it's inspirational to meet you and talk to you, if only for a few minutes each.

We're excited about a project that we've been working on for some time. Soon we'll help launch a web-based "Army Benefits Tool" (ABT) that will be on a home page under "Army Knowledge Online" (AKO) (www.us.army.mil.) By the way, AKO is a great retiree benefit that you should check out. AKO is one way the Army is communicating with soldiers, retirees, and family members through the web. ABT's intent is to help soldiers, retirees, veterans, and family members locate sources of current information on pay, benefits, and entitlements aligned to a "life cycle model" of a soldier—from entry into service, thru transition, retirement, and even death. The web site will have a variety of informational links, as well as calculators to assist in individual planning for the future. Stay tuned.

As I indicated in the May issue, we're working with the Installation Management Agency to insure that installation Retirement Services Offices remain a priority personnel operation on post. Once again I solicit your participation in your area installation retiree council. Doing so will help make sure your views are heard by installation commanders and strengthen the role of the local RSO.

Finally, continue to support the outstanding Americans in uniform. Who among us is not proud of what they do every day, no matter where on earth they're sent? Like many of you once did, they serve in some tough places under extremely difficult conditions. As you did, they serve America with grace and strength and the certainty that we live in the greatest nation on earth. Remember their families. And always proudly proclaim "once a soldier, always a soldier". It remains an honor to serve you.

John W. Radke
Chief, Army Retirement
Services

Overseas mail limit waived for Rx

Military retirees living overseas can now receive prescription drug shipments larger than 16 ounces.

Contracted suppliers for the TRICARE Mail Order Pharmacy (TMOP) program can mail a 90-day supply of prescription drugs, because an exception has been made to the policy that limits the weight of the packages sent to APO/FPO addresses.

This exception to policy is limited to prescription medication shipments. No other suppliers or programs are authorized under this policy. Currently, Express-Scripts, Inc., is the only authorized TMOP contracted supplier.

Combat-Related Special Compensation update

Three months after the start of Combat-Related Special Compensation (CRSC), the Army had received almost 16,000 applications. Six hundred thirty-two applications had been approved; 680 were denied and 1,744 were waiting for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) records.

CRSC is a special benefit for certain disabled military retirees. Congress enacted the benefit in the Fiscal Year 2003 Defense Authorization Act.

Military retirees receiving disability compensation from the VA have their military retired pay reduced by the amount of the disability compensation. CRSC will replace some of that reduction (except for any part of the compensation paid for dependents) for military retirees with combat-related disabilities who meet the criteria stated below. CRSC will be paid by the Defense Finance and Accounting Service's Cleveland Center which will make payments retroactive to June 1, 2003, for those whose disability occurred before that date.

To be eligible, the military retiree must have at least 20 years of active duty or a combination of active duty and Reserve points equaling 20 years of full-time active duty (**7,200 points**) and either a VA disability rating of 10 percent or higher associated with award of a Purple Heart; or a

VA disability rating of 60 percent or higher for other illnesses or injuries attributed to combat situations, combat-oriented training, hazardous duty, or instrumentality of war.

CRSC is **not** granted automatically. Retirees who believe they are eligible must apply for it.

The application form and instructions are available at <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/crsc/>; or <http://www.dior.whs.mil/forms/DD2860.PDF>; or <http://web1.whs.osd.mil/icdhome/DD2500.htm>; or through Army Installation Retirement Services Officers (RSO) (see pgs 9-10).

Applications are being processed by the Army Personnel Command's CRSC Branch. A branch spokesman says that the main reason applications have been denied thus far is that the retiree's disability did not meet the combat-related definition. The CRSC branch offers the following guidance for Army retirees who have applied or are planning to apply for CRSC.

For Reserve retirees – you must have 7,200 points to meet the length-of-service requirement. Reserve retirees who meet the disability requirement but did not earn 7,200 point do not qualify.

For those retired for disability – you still must have completed at least 20 years of service (or 7,200 points) in order to meet the length-of-service requirement.

For all applicants –When submitting an application, include a copy of your DD Form 214 or 215, retirement orders, Purple Heart citations and orders, initial and most current VA rating decisions, Reserve retirement and point documentation, and other service documents indicating a combat-related disability.

For all retirees who have applied or are planning to apply for CRSC – The CRSC Branch asks that you be patient since they've been flooded with applications. They say retirees will receive an acknowledgement a few weeks after their applications are received.

For all retirees calling the CRSC Branch – The CRSC team asks for your patience because they're receiving about 700 calls a week. They report that the only time you'll have to leave a message is when two other calls are in progress or after hours (before 8:30 a.m. and after 5 p.m.). Two phone operators take calls and answer messages all day with an extra person added when the voicemail system has 30 calls.

So, if you have a question about CRSC, first, check the CRSC information on the Army Retirement Services Home Page (www.armyg1.army.mil/retire). If you still have questions, call your RSO. Finally, call the CRSC branch at 1-866-281-3254 or 703-325-5163.

DoD offers the following additional guidance.

Classify disabilities as awarded by the VA. If you don't have this information, contact the VA regional office (1-800-827-1000) and request a listing of their disabilities by VASRD code (VA Schedule of Rating Disabilities). The VA has notified regional offices to expect and support such requests.

Try to submit a copy of the first VA rating decision on the disability showing the basis of the award — especially for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). More recent ratings may show only that the disability rating has been increased with no information about the origin of the disability or basis of the award.

Avoid submission of unrelated documents. Try to provide only those supporting documents that deal with qualifying conditions. This is especially true for medical records. The review board may find it difficult to document a combat disability if the retiree sends in all his/her medical records.

Workshop helps RSOs help soldiers, retirees

Ninety-two Retirement Services Officers (RSOs) and Transition Center (TC) personnel took part in a weeklong training workshop in Arlington, VA, to help them serve soldiers, retirees and families. The bi-annual workshop, held from Aug. 4-8, was followed by a two-day class for new Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) counselors.

RSOs prepare soldiers and families for retirement and continue to provide support for retirees and families after retirement. All retirees and their families are served by an RSO although, in some cases, the RSO may serve retirees in more than one state. (See pgs. 9 and 10 for a list of RSOs.)

The workshop was conducted by the G-1's Army Retirement Service staff with the Personnel Command's Retirement and Separations Branch. Workshop topics included TRICARE and Army

medicine, Retired and Annuitant Pay, the Armed Forces Retirement Home, the Army Well-Being Program and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits. This year's workshop featured two firsts – elective break-out instruction sessions and one-on-one staff assistance visits between 35 RSOs and members of the five-person Army Retirement Services staff. It was the first workshop for almost half of the attendees.

As a result of downsizing, many RSOs serve not only as RSOs but also as TC managers, casualty assistance officers and ID card officers. After recent competitions between government's "most efficient organization (MEO)" and private contractors, some RSOs are now part of a smaller MEO, others are contractors.

Retired LTG John A. Dubia, Co-Chairman of the Army Chief of Staff's Retiree Council, welcomed RSOs and TC personnel as they began a week of briefings by subject matter experts, telling them, "You're the subject matter expert for retirees." He reminded attendees of everything retirees continue to do for the Army as "retired still serving" volunteers on posts and "combat multipliers" volunteering for mobilization.

The Adjutant General BG Gina Farrisee also welcomed workshop participants, telling them, "I sincerely thank you for everything you do to support soldiers and families."

SMA announces retirement at workshop

Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) Jack L. Tilley chose the RSO/TC Training Workshop as the occasion to announce his January 2004 retirement.

The weeklong workshop included a motivational talk by the Army's top enlisted soldier. Tilley spoke about his concerns and the concerns of all soldiers and families facing retirement and thanked RSOs for what they do for soldier and families getting ready to retire.

"Retiring is a scary time," Tilley said, "When you decide to retire, you think about what's important in life like family and the things that you do for us before we depart the military."

Tilley told the RSOs and TC personnel, "I want to thank you for what you do. You are the unsung heroes of the Army." He urged them to "stay motivated."

Blood needed to support servicemembers

Though major hostilities have ended in Iraq, blood is still needed to support those who remain and those engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom. In addition to supporting the needs of military members and their families at home, the Armed Services Blood Program (ASBP) is responsible for supplying blood to soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines deployed worldwide. Having enough blood in forward areas can make the difference between life and death for those injured in the line of duty.

The ASBP needs continuing donor support. The ASBP collects blood from the military community, for the military community. There are 20 ASBP centers at major military installations worldwide.

An online directory of blood donor centers is available at www.tricare.osd.mil/asbpo/donor_info/donor_centers.htm or by contacting Armed Services Blood Program Office; 5109 Leesburg Pike, Suite 698; Falls Church, VA 22041-3258; (703) 681-8024.

ASBP Director COL G. Michael Fitzpatrick said, "The program depends on donors who give as often as they can to provide blood products for sick and injured service- members. Many of those who gave routinely are now deployed or are temporarily unable to give because they were recently in malaria-endemic areas. We need others to step up and fill that void."

Donor eligibility information is available at www.tricare.osd.mil/asbpo/donor_info/deferral.htm or from your local donor center.

Special stamp commemorates Korean War

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Postal Service is helping to ensure "The Forgotten War" is remembered for generations to come with a new 37-cent postage stamp honoring the Korean War Veterans Memorial. The stamp was issued as part of DoD's 50th Anniversary of the Korean War Armistice Commemoration Ceremony.

“This stamp will serve as a reminder that we must not forget the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice and those who returned home without fanfare,” Robert F. Rider, Korean War veteran and member of the presidentially appointed Postal Service Board of Governors, who dedicated the stamp, said.

The Korean War Veterans Memorial features 19 stainless-steel statues that depict 14 soldiers, one sailor, one airman and three Marines, shown marching in a wedge formation as if on patrol. The figures are clad in wind-blown ponchos to recall the harsh weather troops endured. The stamp depicts this part of the memorial.

The photograph on this stamp, taken by John W. Alli of Catonsville, MD, shows the statues shrouded in heavy snow. Richard Sheaff of Scottsdale, AZ., designed the stamp.

Previous U.S. stamps issued in 1985 and 1999 also recognized the bravery of Korean War veterans and the significance of the Korean War in history.

Army G-1 visits Vietnam recovery site

WASHINGTON (ARNEWS) — A Vietnam veteran still on active duty recently visited the fire base where he was stationed 34 years ago.

LTG John M. Le Moyne, the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, visited U.S. soldiers in Vietnam working to recover American remains from a crash site in Ba Ria-Vung Tau. The soldiers are assigned to Detachment 2 of Joint Task Force-Full Accounting and the Central Identification Laboratory Hawaii (CILHI).

Teams conduct full-blown recovery site operations in Vietnam about four times a year for 30 days at a time. As the Army G-1, Le Moyne has oversight over the Hawaii CILHI team.

The team combs through thousands of tons of mud taken from the ground and supervises hired Vietnamese locals who screen the mud for fragments.

They recovered glass from an aircraft cockpit and fragments from a fuselage confirming that the site location was accurate.

Following his site visit, Le Moyne took a drive to visit an old fire base site where he had operated. Le Moyne said he was amazed at the difference in the country from how he left it as a young officer.

“I couldn't even tell a war had been fought there,” Le Moyne said. “The effects of a peacetime economy were striking.”

Cold War certificates available

ALEXANDRIA, VA (ARNEWS) — Servicemembers, retirees, veterans and federal employees who served between Sept. 2, 1945 and Dec. 26, 1991 are still eligible for a Cold War Recognition Certificate, Army Personnel Command officials said.

In 1998, the Secretary of Defense approved awarding the certificate to personnel who served during the Cold War. So far, only about one million people out of the 22 million entitled to receive the certificate have responded, officials said. An application for the certificate can be found on the Internet at <https://coldwar.army.mil> with information about application procedures and required documentation or by calling (703) 325-5864. An acceptable supporting document for proof of service is any official government or military document with the recipient's name, Social Security Number or Military Service Number or Foreign Service Number, and date of service.

Applications will be accepted only by fax or mail, officials said. More information on the certificate can be found on the web site or by calling (703) 325-5864.

New logo, web site for Armed Forces Retirement Home

The Armed Forces Retirement Home (AFRH) has revamped its web site and replaced its logo. The site, www.afrh.com, offers a choice of text sizes and includes more pictures and information on the AFRH residences in Washington, DC, and Gulfport, LA.



DoD forming plan to merge exchanges

WASHINGTON (AFPS) – DoD is working on a plan to consolidate the service exchanges, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Charles Abell, said.

Congress must approve any move to merge the Army and Air Forces Exchange Service (AAFES), the Navy Exchange and the Marine Corps Exchange. Provided Congress gives the go-ahead, Abell said it will still be “some years” down the road before the move occurs.

Abell said DoD will be sensitive to the stakeholders in the process. “We’re going to listen to a lot of people,” he said. “The whole goal here is to make it better at the end, and if we can’t do that, then we won’t do this.”

Former AAFES commander, retired Air Force MG C.J. Wax, is developing the plan for a united exchange service.

DoD has discussed consolidating the exchanges in the past. Abell said that high-level support for the proposal will work toward its actually happening, citing Defense Secretary Rumsfeld’s support of transformation.

One aspect officials hope will improve under the consolidation is the dividend the exchanges return to the services’ morale, welfare and recreation (MWR) funds.

“(The dividend) has gone down over the last four or five years,” Abell said. “This is a way to save costs and thus improve our dividend.”

Abell said a consolidation will “be transparent” to exchange workers and shoppers. “Marines are still going to go to a Marine Exchange, sailors are still going to go in to a Navy Exchange, and airmen go into a BX and soldiers go into a PX,” he said. “What we’re changing is the ‘back room’ things and the management above the store level.”

He said shoppers should see improved service, availability, variety and, ultimately, better dividends.

Consolidating the infrastructure above store level means the system could cut down on duplication.

Store employees do not have to worry about their jobs. “If it takes a certain number of people to run the exchange at one base, it’s probably going to take the same number of people to run that exchange after consolidation,” Abell said. “If you work at the exchange, if you shop at the exchange, you should not see any difference.”

Abell said there is no target figure for savings. “It’s not about saving money,” he said. “It’s about improving the dividend to the MWR accounts to all the services.”

DeCA scores high in survey

FT LEE, VA – A steady rise in customer satisfaction continues as commissary shoppers gave high marks – a 4.42 overall score out of a possible 5.0 – in the latest commissary customer service survey, Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) officials announced.

The results of the 2003 mid-year customer service survey mark a steady rise in customer satisfaction going back to 2000 when customers gave commissaries an overall score of 4.23. By 2001, the score had risen to 4.33, and by November 2002, the score had risen to 4.39.

The agency conducted the survey annually from 1991 to 2001; survey frequency increased to twice a year in 2002. The increased frequency makes it easier for the agency to measure improvements and to identify what and where to improve.

The survey tallies the responses to 14 questions from more than 20,000 customers worldwide. The 2003 mid-year survey showed customer satisfaction rose slightly in each of the 14 areas, compared to the previous survey. The greatest improvements dealt with time and ease of shopping.

DeCA operates a worldwide chain of nearly 280 commissaries. Authorized patrons purchase items at cost plus a 5 percent surcharge, which covers the costs of building new commissaries and modernizing existing ones.

DeCA closes Ft Monroe store

FT LEE, VA – A steady drop in customers and larger, more modern commissaries nearby were factors in the decision to close the Ft. Monroe, VA, commissary, according to DoD officials.

The decision came after an extensive analysis of the store's operations found sales had declined 45 percent since 1998 at Ft Monroe, while sales increased at nearby commissaries. The decrease in sales had resulted in operating costs (figured on a per-dollar-of-sales basis) that were about three times higher than other commissaries in the area. Closing the Ft. Monroe store will help DeCA reduce and redirect appropriated funds to improve the overall commissary benefit.

ACAP opens to retirees

The Army Career and Alumni Program's (ACAP) employment assistance services have been extended on a "Space-Available" basis to all Army retirees and their eligible family members for life, James T. Hoffman, ACAP Director, announced. This lifetime extension of ACAP services is available only to **Army** retirees and their eligible family members (those with military ID cards).

Army retirees may return to any ACAP center to receive employment assistance along with their eligible family members. These services include: preparing resumes; polishing interviewing skills; and attending special workshops. Even if you don't live near an ACAP Center, you can remain in contact with a counselor by email, fax and phone.

ACAP will not be considered a retirement "benefit", but rather a service to retirees that will continue as long as it is resourced. ACAP will provide appointments to the retired community based on their daily workload of serving active duty soldiers first.

Further, ACAP policy allows veterans and other military service retirees extended ACAP services for up to 180 days after separation or retirement. Please share this information with those you know who may be eligible

For more information, go to www.acap.army.mil/transitioner/retiree/retiree.cfm. The ACAP site also includes a list of the Army installations with ACAP offices, a list of job fairs, and tips on finding a job.

Insurance refund for some vets

WASHINGTON – Veterans insured by Hartford Life Insurance Company or USAA Life Insurance Company who paid VA copayments for VA medical care received from Jan. 1, 1995 – Dec. 31, 2001 may receive a refund of those copayments. These veterans may apply to VA for a refund of their copayments on a first-come, first-served basis. All refund requests must be postmarked by Apr. 1, 2004. VA mailed noticed to veterans whose records show they might be eligible. Other veterans who believe they may be eligible for a refund can get a claims form by calling 1-866-258-2772 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., EST, Monday – Friday, or by downloading the form at www.va.gov/hottopic/.

'Forgotten widow' benefit nears 6th anniversary

Dec. 1st will mark the sixth anniversary of the Annuity for Certain Military Surviving Spouses (ACMSS) also known as the "forgotten widows" benefit for certain surviving spouses of retirees.

This anniversary is important since there is a six-year statute of limitations on payments. This means that surviving spouses who apply after Dec. 1st and are determined to be qualified will receive payments retroactive to the date of application instead of the effective date of the law since the law will be more than six years old. All beneficiaries are limited to six years of retroactive payments. **Note: Surviving spouses can still apply for ACMSS -- there is no six-year limit on applications.**

Annuities are currently paid retroactive to the December 1997, the law's effective date, for certain surviving spouses of active duty retirees. Benefits for certain surviving spouses of gray area Reserve retirees will continue to be paid retroactive to December 1999 until the sixth anniversary of that benefit passes.

ACMSS was created by Congress for the surviving spouses of retirees who died before being able to participate in the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP). Surviving spouses of active duty retirees may be eligible **if the soldier retired before Sept. 21, 1972, and died before Mar. 21, 1974.**

Surviving spouses of "gray area" Reserve retirees may be eligible **if the Reservist had at least 20 qualifying years of service; would have been eligible to receive retired pay at age 60; and died before Oct. 1, 1978. Applicants must not have remarried and cannot be receiving any other military survivor annuity.**

Of the 1,568 Army surviving spouses who applied, 1,216 Army surviving spouses have qualified thus far. Surviving spouses who applied and were not approved included those whose spouses died after the dates set by the law and could have elected SBP. Surviving spouses who have remarried are not qualified, even if that marriage has ended. Surviving spouses receiving another military survivor annuity such as the VA's Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) annuity or the Retired Serviceman's Family Protection Plan (RSFPP) are also not eligible.

If you know anyone who may be eligible for this benefit, urge them to submit an application, available at www.armyg1.army.mil/retire.

Shades of Green postpones reopening

ORLANDO, FL - The refurbished Armed Forces Recreation Center (AFRC) Shades of Green on Walt Disney World Resort won't open till Mar. 1, 2004, instead of the originally planned Dec. 15, 2003.

Unexpected construction delays caused officials to move the date back 76 days, according to Peter F. Isaacs, chief operating officer at the Army Community and Family Support Center. The Army serves as the executive agent, operating AFRCs for DoD.

"When we were on schedule, we began accepting guest reservations in December of last year," Isaacs said. "We sincerely regret the inconvenience this causes our customers and want to give them as much advance notice as possible. We are in the process of notifying those who have reservations and offering them other options."

Shades of Green General Manager Jim McCrindle signed more than 2,200 letters to guests already booked at Shades of Green, informing them of the delay.

"We're genuinely sorry for the delay, but it was unavoidable," he said.

Guests who already hold reservations are offered three options:

- Keep the same vacation dates for 2004 at the same room rates guaranteed in 2003.
- Keep their vacation dates for 2003 at a comparable Disney Resort at the same room rates plus the applicable state tax of 11 percent.
- Cancel the existing reservation and receive a full refund.

The renovation and expansion project that began in April 2002 was driven by high demand that kept the original 288 rooms at or near 100 percent occupancy. The hotel is financially self-sufficient, and no taxpayer dollars are used in the operations or for the new construction. When it reopens, there will be 586 new or renovated rooms, 500 new covered parking spaces and 7,500 square feet of space for special events.

The current room rates of \$66 for E-1 through E-5 will only go up \$4, to \$70. Other rates are computed on a sliding scale based on rank.

AFRC Shades of Green is open to DoD ID card holders in all branches of military service: active duty and reserve components, DoD civilians, both military and civilian DoD retirees, and their families.

"The information about our new opening date and reservations is on our web site," said McCrindle, adding, "The best way to make a reservation is to use the web site as the phones tend to be overloaded."

For more information, access www.shadesofgreen.org or call, toll free, 1-888-593-2242.

Army myPay users can get ID number online

ARLINGTON, VA - Army personnel can now obtain their myPay personal identification numbers (PINs) by using a new online feature called ePIN. myPay is an online system operated by the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS). ePIN is available to active, Reserve, Guard, civilians and military retirees with Army Knowledge Online (AKO) accounts. (Note: myPay is available to Survivor Benefit Plan annuitants; however, ePIN through AKO is not.)

ePIN simplifies the process of gaining access to myPay. Personnel can visit the myPay web site, <https://myPay.dfas.mil>, and click on the "New PIN" button. The system will verify the identity of users through their Social Security numbers. Users can elect delivery of the PIN by email or regular mail. Email delivery takes place within 48 hours.

With myPay, you can perform the following activities:

- View and print retiree account statements.
- View and print tax statements.
- Change federal and state tax withholdings.
- Update bank account and electronic funds transfer information.
- Manage allotments.
- Edit address information.
- Manage savings bonds.

Available nearly 24/7, myPay means no waiting in lines or on the phone. Easy to use menus and clear confirmation messages give customers confidence that changes they request are made quickly and correctly.

Strong encryption and secure technologies combined with user-unique access make myPay safe to use and protect personal information from unauthorized access.

myPay recently passed the two-million customer mark. The myPay project team received a Defense Value Engineering Achievement Award for giving customers control over their payroll information.

PERSCOM, AR-PERSCOM to merge

The Army is creating a single command to perform the functions of the Total Army Personnel Command (PERSCOM) in Alexandria, VA, and Army Reserve Personnel Command (AR-PERSCOM) in St. Louis, MO.

The command will integrate the two organizations into a multicomponent field operating agency (FOA) under the Army G-1 to better meet the needs of Army soldiers and civilians. The Civilian Personnel Operations Center Management Agency will realign into this FOA later.

The merger is the result of a recommendation of an Army Human Resources Integrated Process Team (HRIPT) convened last year.

"The HRIPT recommendations are far-reaching, complex, and involve the active Army, Army Reserve, National Guard, DA civilians and contractors," LTG John Le Moyne, the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, said. "This will have long-lasting impact on our Army's future and our support operations."

"This integration will serve as the foundation for changing the manner in which we care for the Army's most valuable resource and foundation, its people," LTG James Helmly, the Chief of Army Reserve, said.

AR-PERSCOM and PERSCOM are keeping their names and unit insignia until a date to be determined.

Advancement on retired list reg revised

The regulation governing advancement on the retired list, Army Regulation (AR) 15-80, has been revised. AR 15-80 authorizes the Army Grade Determination Review Board (AGDRB) to determine the highest grade satisfactorily held on active duty and direct advancements on the

retired list at the 30-year mark when requested. The 30-year mark is the date you complete 30 years of active duty service and time on the retired list. Active duty service does **not** include Section 1405, Title 10, U.S. Code, service.

Under the revised 15-80, you no longer have to wait until you reach your 30-year mark to apply for advancement on the retired list, unless the reduction was due to misconduct, inefficiency or for cause. Any advancement on the retired list **will not** occur **until** you reach your 30-year mark.

Also, you can no longer use a DD Form 149 to apply for advancement unless you were medically retired/separated. You can apply by writing a letter to the board (see sample letter in AR 15-80 at www.usapa.army.mil or arba.army.pentagon.mil).

If you don't have access to a computer, you can request the sample letter by writing to: Army Review Boards Agency; ATTN: Client Information and Quality Assurance; 1941 Jefferson Davis Hwy (2nd Fl); Arlington, VA 22202-4508; or calling 703-607-1600. **Do not** send any applications to them.

Mail your application letter to the Army Review Boards Agency Support Division; ATTN: SFMR-RBR-SL; 9700 Page Ave.; St. Louis; MO 63132-5200. They will attach your military personnel file to your letter and forward them to ARBA. Since you may not appear before the board, you should include a copy of any relevant documents with your letter.

Section 3964 of Title 10 permits certain soldiers who retired with less than 30 years of active service to be advanced on the retired list to the highest grade in which they served satisfactorily **on active duty**. This applies to warrant officers, enlisted Regular Army members and Reserve enlisted Army members serving on active duty at retirement. For National Guard members, full-time National Guard duty is considered active duty. Those who retired as commissioned officers (other than a warrant officer) are **not** eligible.

To be advanced on the retired list to the highest grade held satisfactorily, you must **have actually held that higher grade**. You must have been promoted to and paid in that rank and grade, and served at that grade for the required statutory or regulatory period of time. Serving in, "acting as" or holding a position or job title authorized a higher grade is not sufficient. If you were an enlisted member or a warrant officer and also held a Reserve commission, you may be eligible for advancement on the retired list if you served on active duty in that higher commissioned officer rank for the required statutory or regulatory period of time.

For more information, go to arba.army.pentagon.mil.

Make your voice heard – vote!

One TRICARE for Life contract awarded

Wisconsin Physicians Service Insurance Corporation (WPS), of Madison, WI, has been awarded the TRICARE Dual-Eligible Fiscal Intermediary Contract (TDEFIC).

The contract includes claims processing, customer service and administrative services for those eligible for both TRICARE and Medicare. Currently, these services are provided by regional contractors. Under TDEFIC, all dual-eligible beneficiaries, including TRICARE for Life beneficiaries, will be served by one contractor. Other beneficiaries will still be served by regional contractors.

"The DoD is committed to providing the best health care possible for our beneficiaries," Dr. William Winkenwerder, Jr., Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, said. "From lessons we have learned during previous contracts, we chose to simplify contract administration, increase accountability and improve customer service by centering these responsibilities in one contract. We are confident this will enhance the services we provide to beneficiaries while ensuring fiscal responsibility."

The contract covers a five-year period and is valued at about \$487 million. It will begin on Apr. 1, 2004.

TDEFIC will include about 1.7 million beneficiaries eligible for both TRICARE and Medicare. Beneficiaries should not be affected by this change unless they need to submit a paper claim. WPS will notify beneficiaries of the change in mailing address for paper claims submission. WPS will provide this information when services begin for the contract.

More information about the next generation of contracts is available on the TRICARE web site at www.tricare.osd.mil/pmo/t-nex/.

TRICARE awards designated provider contracts

Contracts have been awarded to five Designated Providers for continued comprehensive health care services for TRICARE beneficiaries enrolled in DoD's Uniformed Services Family Health Plan (USFHP).

Contracts were awarded to Martin's Point Health Care, Portland, ME, 1-888-241-4556; Brighton Marine Health Center, Boston, MA, 1-800-818-8589; CHRISTUS Health, Houston, TX, 1-800-678-7347; the Pacific Medical Clinics, Seattle, WA, 1-888-958-7347; and Johns Hopkins Medical Services Corporation, Baltimore, MD, 1-800-808-7347.

DoD anticipates awarding one additional provider contract to St. Vincent's Catholic Medical Center of New York, Staten Island, NY, later this year. Fairview Health Systems, owned by the Cleveland Clinic Health System, Cleveland, OH, elected not to continue as a provider effective July 1, 2003.

These providers offer a TRI-CARE Prime-like benefit to about 77,000 enrolled beneficiaries. Eligible beneficiaries include retirees, their family members and survivors who live within specific geographic areas in Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Washington and West Virginia.

Beneficiaries enrolled in USFHP may not use services within the Military Health System including the TRICARE pharmacy programs, unless they have been referred to a military treatment facility by a USFHP provider. USFHP offers pharmacy options separate from TRICARE. USFHP beneficiaries over age 65 can be disenrolled for using Medicare for duplicate services. Persons with other primary health insurance coverage (not including Medicare) cannot be covered under the USFHP.

Enrolling in the USFHP costs \$230 per individual or \$460 per family for retirees and their family members. The enrollment fee is waived for any TRICARE beneficiary who has Medicare Part A and is enrolled in Medicare Part B.

USFHP recently reported 2003 member satisfaction ratings of 88 percent which, for the tenth straight year, is significantly higher than the national average for health plans as reported by the National Committee for Quality Assurance.

More information is available at www.usfhp.org/portal/default.asp.

TRICARE changes call center hours

The TRICARE Information Call Center now operates Monday –Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Eastern time (excluding federal holidays).

(Please note that calls are answered in English only.) National toll-free numbers are:

Senior Pharmacy Program 1-877-DoD-MEDS (1-877-363-6337)

TRICARE For Life 1-888-DoD-LIFE (1-888-363-5433)

TRICARE Online 1-866-DoD-EWEB (1-866-363-3932)

HIPAA (Privacy Rule) 1-888-DoD-HIPA (1-888-363-4472)

TRICARE awards new region contracts

TRICARE has awarded contracts to the three companies that will be managing its three consolidated regions. Currently, 12 TRICARE regions are managed by seven contractors.

The contractors will provide health care services to 8.7 million uniformed services beneficiaries and support to military hospitals and clinics in the U.S.

Health Net Federal Services, Rancho Cordova, CA; Humana Military Healthcare Services, Louisville, KY; and TriWest Healthcare Alliance Corp., Phoenix, AZ; have been awarded the contracts.

Health Net Federal Services is the awardee for the \$2.2 billion contract for the TRICARE North region and will provide support and health care services in Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

Humana Military Healthcare Services is the awardee for the \$2 billion contract for the TRICARE South region and will provide support and health care services in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and the eastern portion of Texas.

TriWest Healthcare Alliance Corp. is the awardee for the \$2.1 billion contract for the TRICARE West region and will provide support and health care services in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, the western portion of Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Each contract includes at least a nine-month transition, plus five one-year option periods for health care delivery and support.

"I anticipate a smooth transition," Dr. William Winkenwerder Jr., Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, said. "Through the transition period, beneficiaries will receive information about enrollment choices, primary care manager selections and the availability of specialists."

The transition began Sept. 1, 2003. The turnover of responsibility for services in the newly aligned TRICARE regions will be phased in, starting with areas in the West region on June 1, 2004, and will be completed by November 2004. The new contracts will be simpler for the government to administer.

Transition guidance

During the transition period, beneficiaries will continue to file claims with their current TRI-CARE contractor. Eligible beneficiaries are encouraged to contact the Defense Manpower Data Center Support Office (DSO) to ensure enrollment information in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) is current. DEERS enrollment may be verified by contacting the DSO at (800) 538-9552, or by visiting the nearest uniformed services personnel office. A list of personnel offices is available at www.dmdc.osd.mil/rsi

The contracts put customer satisfaction first by providing incentives for top performance in telephone access, claims payment and quality medical outcomes.

"I am very pleased with this next generation of TRICARE contracts," LTG James B. Peake, Army Surgeon General and Commander, U.S. Army Medical Command, said. "They will take us to the next step in focusing on our patients, claims efficiency, ease of portability and enhancing our military medical facilities."

New, improved TRICARE site

The Health Affairs (HA) and TRICARE Management Activity (TMA) web sites have merged.

The site (www.tricare.osd.mil) has many upgrades including an improved search engine, text-only A-to-Z browsing, more quick links and resources, and consolidated news. Users will find the site easier to navigate for regional information, fact sheets, the TRI-CARE Handbook and policy information.

As part of the site consolidation, the search capability has been enhanced to produce more organized results, including new search options. Search tips help the infrequent Internet user, while resources flank the search results section to help users locate information. The search upgrade also includes the ability to search different categories simultaneously. These can be as general or specific as the user needs, such as searching the entire site or a specific area (e.g., web sites, TRICARE Handbook, news releases, fact sheets, etc.).

VA to fill non-VA prescriptions

WASHINGTON - Some veterans waiting to see Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) physicians for the first time may be eligible to receive medications prescribed by private doctors from VA mail-out pharmacies, under a new policy.

"This policy should ease the minds of veterans with pharmaceutical needs who have been waiting too long for their first appointment," Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi said. "Traditionally, an examination and a prescription — both by a VA physician — have been required before VA would provide pharmacy benefits to veterans."

To be eligible, veterans must meet all the following conditions:

- Have enrolled in VA health care **before July 25, 2003** (when details about the new benefit were published in the Federal Register), and
- Have requested their first primary care appointment with VA before July 25, 2003, and
- Have been waiting more than 30 days for their first appointment with a primary care physician as of Sept. 22, 2003.

The first prescriptions were filled under the new program on September 22. Between the July announcement and filling the first prescriptions, VA identified and contacted eligible veterans and put new procedures in place.

VA estimates that 200,000 veterans will be eligible for the benefit. For more information, call the toll-free number on VA health benefits: 1-877-222-8387.

VA cemeteries mark 30th year

WASHINGTON — The VA cemetery system marks 30 years of operation in September.

On Sept. 1, 1973, Congress transferred 82 national cemeteries, and the program that provides headstones and markers for the graves of veterans, from the Army to what was then the Veterans Administration. Those cemeteries joined 21 others already operated by VA.

From 1862, when national cemeteries were created during Abraham Lincoln's presidency, to 1973 — a span of 111 years — just over 1.3 million interments were made in national veterans cemeteries. In the 30 years since then, VA has buried 1.7 million veterans, spouses and children.

Since taking over the national cemetery system in 1973, VA has established 17 new cemeteries, begun planning five more and increased annual burials from 36,400 to a record 89,300 in 2002. VA also distributed a record number of headstones and markers last year for graves of veterans worldwide — 348,000.

VA's planning of new cemeteries, and its grant program helping states to build veterans cemeteries, are designed for a death rate among veterans that will continue to rise for several years. Nearly 655,000 veteran deaths are estimated for this year, with the death rate peaking at 676,000 in 2008.

"VA is committed to making every national cemetery a national shrine, which visitors will consider beautiful and awe-inspiring tributes to those who gave so much to preserve America's freedom and way of life," VA Secretary Principi said.

100 companies join VetFran

WASHINGTON — ExxonMobil recently became the 100th company to join the Veterans Transition Franchise Initiative, commonly known as "VetFran," which makes obtaining a franchise more affordable for veterans.

The International Franchise Association (IFA) introduced VetFran in the early 1990s as a way for franchisers to express gratitude to military members for their service during the first Gulf War. The program was re-introduced September 2002 for all honorably discharged veterans. The companies offering VetFran discounts to veterans represent a broad range of small-business ownership opportunities, including restaurant, retail, service and technology franchises.

More than a dozen veterans have acquired franchises through the VetFran program during the past year, and applications are being considered from about two dozen other veterans.

Many VetFran franchisers allow veterans to acquire a franchise with a down payment of 10 percent or less of the initial franchise cost, which generally ranges from \$45,000 to \$150,000 for a small business. ExxonMobil is providing a one-time waiver of up to \$5,000 for certain training fees to any qualified honorably discharged veteran who has been identified for training to operate a specific Exxon or Mobil franchise dealer site.

More information on the program can be found at www.franchise.org or by calling (202) 628-8000. For information about other business opportunities and programs for veterans, visit VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise web page at www.vetbiz.gov.

Short Shots

(Note: Publications, organizations and events that may be of interest to retirees appear in this section as a service to retirees. This doesn't imply that Army Echoes endorses these publications or programs. Any problems should be directed to the specific publisher or organization.)

• Marquis Trust Group, LLC (MTG) and the National Military Family Association (NMFA) have started **HomeFront Cards™** campaign, a national greeting card outreach program encouraging Americans to recognize the sacrifices made by military families. The cards will reach thousands of families and help raise funds for NMFA's programs. HomeFront Cards™ can be bought and sent by individuals, families and small groups, or sponsored by larger organizations, to be personalized by employees, customers and/or fans. As a card sender, you add your name, hometown, and a few words to send a message of thanks and support to a deserving military family. HomeFront Cards™ are then deposited in a collection box, if one is provided, or mailed to a predetermined screening and delivery location. From there, HomeFront Cards™, with cooperation from NMFA, delivers the cards to military families in the U.S. and overseas. The HomeFront Cards™ website brings together card senders and recipients through its "Message Exchange" feature. To learn more about HomeFront Cards, how you can participate or how the program works, visit www.HomeFrontCards.com. NMFA is an organization dedicated to identifying and resolving issues of concern to military families. To learn more about NMFA's programs and services, visit www.NMFA.org. HomeFront Cards™ were created by Marquis Trust Group, LLC (MTG). Marquis Trust Group will donate 25 percent of net proceeds from the HomeFront Cards™ campaign to NMFA, and will establish an endowed scholarship at Lafayette College for sons and daughters of military servicemembers.

Fisher family helps families of wounded

When casualties from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom are evacuated to Army hospitals, their recovery often is eased by having family members near to provide emotional support. But traveling to an Army hospital where a loved one is being treated can be a hardship. That's where the Fisher House Foundation begun by Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher steps in.

The foundation has built 31 Fisher Houses, providing lodging near military hospitals for patients' families. It also pays lodging expenses for families when a Fisher House is full. It has provided airline tickets to family members of combat casualties in financial need and has arranged for donation of telephone calling cards for Fisher House guests.

Since hostilities began in Afghanistan, Army Fisher Houses have served more than 50 families of combat casualties.

Of the total 31 Fisher Houses, 12 are located with Army hospitals. Two new houses are scheduled to open by the end of 2003. During fiscal year 2002, the Army Fisher Houses served 2,145 families, saving them some \$1.1 million in out-of-pocket lodging expenses. A Fisher House enables a family to stay together, cook meals, do laundry and relax in a home-like atmosphere.

Army Fisher Houses operate as nonappropriated fund activities. Charitable contributions provide most of the funding for the program, and much of the necessary labor is provided by hundreds of volunteers. Families are charged \$10 per night, a fee that can be reduced or waived for families experiencing financial difficulty.

For more information, For more information, call toll-free (888) 294-8560, or go to: www.fisherhouse.org.

Keep retired pay records current

Too often, we hear about survivors who have been denied Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) benefits because the retiree failed to update retired pay records when the retiree married, divorced, remarried, was widowed or gained a child. We hear from surviving spouses who did not receive the retired pay for the portion of the last month the retiree was alive because this money went to someone else whom the soldier had named at retirement.

We hear from former spouses who lost SBP because neither the former spouse nor the retiree notified the Defense Finance and Accounting Service within a year of the divorce that SBP was part of the divorce by sending a letter and a copy of the decree.

To make sure your spouse (or former spouse) is prepared, keep a file of information that your spouse (or former spouse) will need when you die. Make sure your spouse (or former spouse) knows what benefits to expect or not to expect. Clip this article to your files as a reminder to keep your retired pay records current when your status changes.

Note: The SBP "paid up" provision which allows retirees to stop paying SBP premiums after 30 years of premium payment and reaching age 70 does not go into effect until Oct. 1, 2008.

Remember: You are responsible for updating your retired pay file at DFAS-CL (address below) within one year of the event if you marry, remarry, have a child, are widowed or divorce and need to make or update a Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) election.